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should also be discouraged; perhaps the least harmful is the gathering of "*lace-ferns*" to supply the florists, for in this case the roots are not disturbed and the plant has a chance to grow another year. We have grown, very successfully, a colony of the Ostrich Fern on the shady side of the house, where it has multiplied and spread by long root-stocks.

WILD FLOWER PRESERVATION SOCIETY OF AMERICA,
NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN.

The Climbing Fern in the Vicinity of Hartford.

C. A. WEATHERBY.

This story is in the nature of an obituary. After having survived fire and all the natural dangers to which a plant is exposed and the further perils incident to being a favorite of fashion, the climbing fern, once the chief feature, fern-wise, of this region and so remarkably common here, for it, that one of its names is the "Hartford fern," seems now doomed to early extinction through the clearing of its habitat for agricultural purposes.

There are several reasons why the climbing fern is of especial interest. The first is, that it, alone among the native ferns of the United States, does climb. Its slender, but tough, brown stems, twining over the bushes, and its rather pale green leaves, shaped somewhat like a hand with the fingers out-spread, give it a wholly unique appearance. It is the last of our northeastern ferns to begin growth in the spring and to come to maturity. The accompanying photograph was taken well into the summer, yet the summit of the stem is not yet fully uncoiled. The graceful fruiting panicles which appear above the leaves in late summer, are not ripe till the end of September. The climbing fern and its queer relative, the curly grass, are the only representatives of their family, the *Schizaeaceae*, native in



THE CLIMBING FERN, *LYGODIUM PALMATUM*, NEAR HARTFORD, CONN.
From a photograph by R. C. Benedict

the United States. And, finally, the climbing fern is one of the rarer species of the world. Its range, "southern New Hampshire to Florida, Tennessee and Kentucky" is not large, as the ranges of species go, and within this territory it occurs in abundance only at scattered and often widely separated localities. The number of individuals in existence must be insignificant compared, for instance, with the number of royal or cinnamon ferns. In all these respects, then, it occupies a place of distinction.

It may be doubted whether *Lygodium* was very common about Hartford when the first settlers came. As we know it now, it is a plant very particular as to the place in which it grows. It will not endure too much water, or too little, too deep shade, or none at all; and here, at least, it insists on a sandy soil. Its favorite haunts are bushy hollows in the sand plains where the soil is covered with three or four inches of moist black leaf-mold in which its slender rootstocks lie. Such habitats must have been rare under primitive conditions when this region was pretty completely covered with dense forests, largely of white pine. They must have been confined to the borders of the bogs and sloughs occasionally found in the sand-plains. There, with the light which came in from the open spaces of the sloughs, the moisture of their banks, and with the aid of its climbing habit which would enable it to make head among the shrubs which likewise seek such situations, *Lygodium* could, and doubtless did, flourish. As the settlements grew, suitable habitats were unconsciously provided for it in pastures and along the edges of fields and roads; to them it spread and there it multiplied until, though always local, it became one of the familiar and well-known plants of the countryside.

At some time in the sixties, some one discerned in

it decorative possibilities. That was a time of rather rococo taste, of "tidies" and "what-nots" and redundant bric-a-brac: perhaps it is rather to its credit that it recognized the grace and beauty of this little plant. But it was not good for the plant. It became all the rage for house decoration. People who could went out in the fall and gathered their own supply of it: others bought theirs from peddlers who picked the fronds almost by the wagon-load, and sold them on the streets of Hartford. They were bought fresh, then pressed or ironed, with the iron not too hot. So treated, and being naturally evergreen, they would stay green and fresh-looking all winter. No house was considered complete and up-to-date without at least a few sprays draped along the cords and over the frames of pictures and mirrors. Some, at least, of the fern must have been exported: Mrs. Parsons tells of seeing her parents' house in New York decorated with fronds brought from Hartford for the purpose.

Perhaps in the literature of the time some one has written down the detailed history of this fashion. If so, I do not know it, and definite information about it—how long it lasted, how much damage it caused—is now hard to get. Certainly, however, large quantities of the fern must have been used, and the people living in the region where it grew became disturbed and applied to the legislature for relief. That body responded, and on July 8, 1867, the first bill for the protection of a wild plant passed anywhere in the United States, forbidding anyone "wilfully to sever or take from the land of another any *Lygodium* or creeping fern growing or being thereon," became a law. How far this action had its beginnings in the natural exasperation of farmers whose pastures and wood-lots were invaded by fern peddlers, cannot now be determined; but it is interesting to note that the main argument of

the representative in charge of the bill was based on the rarity of the plant and the destruction of it being wrought. Conservation of wild life, then, was at least one of the real objects of the law; and the legislature was sufficiently in earnest to provide a jail penalty as well as a fine for infractions of it.

How strictly the law was enforced and whether any convictions were actually obtained under it, I do not know. But it must have provided the owners of land on which the fern grew with a better weapon than the general trespass laws could offer; and it doubtless hastened the death of the fashion. Certainly the fern, to a considerable extent, came back. Ten years ago it was still possible to see great tangles of it beside the main road from East Windsor Hill to Wapping; and I have watched a new colony appear and establish itself in a clearing. But what fashion failed to do, tillage is doing. The principal crop hereabouts is tobacco, and tobacco flourishes best in the kind of soil which *Lygodium* prefers. Moreover, though a laborious and somewhat risky crop to raise, it brings in a good profit when successful and more and more land is being devoted to it each year. So it happens that there is no more climbing fern on the Wapping road; and the axe and the plough draw nearer each season to the one large station still known to the writer in the South Windsor sand-plains. This cannot be prevented: we cannot, and ought not to, stop the clearing of land suitable for tillage. *Lygodium* may continue to eke out a precarious existence in nooks and corners for many years to come: but only by setting aside as a sanctuary some area small enough not to be missed by the farmer, where it can grow undisturbed, can its continued existence in any quantity be assured.

EAST HARTFORD, CONN.